CHIPEWYAN INDIANS AND THE HUDSON BAY COMPANY

Indian Trappers of the North.
Early Fur Trappers

INDIANS AS MIDDLEMEN

Chipewyan camp, 1885.

CHIPEWYAN INDIANS AND THE FUR TRADE

THE COMPANY AND JAMES KNIGHT'S PLANS

James Knight, Governor of Fort York in 1714 for the Hudson's Bay Company, planned to bring the Chipewyan Indians down to the Bay's trading post with their furs. The reason for this plan was that the English lacked the experience of canoe building and how to handle them to go inland by river.

To carry out his plans, he sent oatmeal every year to the Barren ground tribes. In this way, the Indians became aware of the food available at the posts for their return trip home. He also met with the Indian Captains (chiefs) so that the captains could persuade the tribes to trade at the posts.[1]

WAR BETWEEN TRIBES

The Chipewyans and Crees lived in harmony with each other before the introduction of the fur trade. With the coming of the trade, the two tribes started to have conflicts over the issue of who was to act as middleman. Both tribes couldn't have the position. In a dispute the Chipewyans were driven to the Barren grounds.[2]

THE SLAVE WOMAN

The Hudson's Bay Company made use of a slave woman in the fur trade. The slave woman was a Chipewyan. Her purpose with the Hudson's Bay Company was to act as interpreter. She was used for making contact with the Barren and Inland tribes, and the Company. She was also used for making peace among the tribes and in persuading them to trade with the Company.[3]

PEACE MAKING TRIP (1714)

In 1714 James Knight sent William Stewart, with the slave woman and Cree Indians, inland to make peace between the Chipewyan and Cree. The Crees went along to persuade the Chipewyans to return and trade at the Bay's posts in safety. Upon meeting, the Crees opened fire on the Chipewyans, killing nine of them. Despite the bad start, the slave woman was able to make peace between the tribes. Stewart explained to the Indians what type of furs the company wanted to trade, and how to clean and cure them. They also took back with them ten Chipewyans to learn to speak Cree, so they could act as inpterpreters for trade purposes.[4]

THE EXPEDITION (1715)

In 1715 a band of Chipewyans (members of the ten Chipewyans recruited to act as interpreters) and the Crees heard of the Lake Athabaska region. In the same year they undertook an expedition to the area. The results of the trip opened up trade for the Hudson's Bay Company with the Athabaska Chipewyans. The Crees acted as middlemen.[5]

CHURCHILL TRADING POST (1716-21)

James Knight was ready to set up a trading post at the mouth of the Churchill River to capture the Great Slave and Athabaska area fur trade. His other reason was to find the source of copper, of which he heard so much about from the Chipewyan Indians. He also had seen the Chipewyan and Copper Indians using copper tools, which proved that copper existed.

In the winter of 1716-17, a second slave woman and four Chipewyans were sent to inform their countrymen (their tribe members) that a trading post was to be established in the following summer.[6]

IN SEARCH OF COPPER AND TRADE (1716-21)

In 1719 Henry Kelsey sailed northward in search of the copper mine. This trip was also intended to establish trade and to explore north of Churchill. The search was repeated by Captain Hancock in 1720.

In 1721 Richard Norton, with an Indian lad as guide, set out northward. On his return he brought back eighty Chipewyan Indians and two Copper Indians. The eighty-two Indians were to be used for homeguard Indians. Homeguard Indians were Indians that lived near the post, hunted and provided food for the posts.

In 1721 Henry Kelsey again set out with Norton in search of the mine. He also took with him one of the Northern Indians, who promised to show where the copper mine was located.[7]

KEEPING THE PEACE AND TRADE (1717-18)

Richard Norton was sent out to winter with the Chipewyan Indians in 1718. His purpose of living with the Indians was to divert them from war and to keep the trade going.[8]

INTO THE 1750's

During the next 30-40 years the pattern of events described above remained the same, until the French started establishing posts inland.

The fur trade failed during the summers of 1755-57-58, when the Chipewyans stopped trading at the Churchill post. When the Indians returned in 1759, William Grover and an Indian guide were sent inland with the Indians. Their purpose was to revive the fur trade from the inland tribes. Within three days Grover returned to get help for the Indian guide who took sick. Upon his return to the spot of departure he found that the Indian guide and the Indian trappers were gone. The guide never returned to the post and rumour was that he was trading inland with the French.[9]

CONCLUSION

The Chipewyans contributed to the Hudson's Bay Company's wealth and very little recognition or credit has been given to them. They contributed by gathering furs, food, and information about rich fur areas. They acted as recruiters for the fur trade business. They were guides for the European explorers and were used as labourers in the fur trade period 1670-1763. The labour included transportation, trapping, cleaning and curing skins, etc. They were not paid for their service. They were only paid for the price of the furs in that period and they were underpaid. Their labour made the Company what it is today.

Fur trappers at Fort Smith with season's catch.

Fur traders in the North

INDIANS AS MIDDLEMEN

'MIDDLEMEN'

The following information provided herein will indicate that the Indians, especially the Assiniboine and Cree, were middlemen during the early part of the fur trade period (1670-1800). The middlemen were dealers between two parties, the producers of goods and the consumers of the goods.

When the English regained control of York Factory in the early 1700's, the Indian trading parties from the northwest, southwest and west were coming to the post. However, this pattern of trade was short lived with the opening of the Churchill post in 1717. The Churchill post took all trade with the Chipewyan and Northern inland tribes. The southwest and southern tribes (Plains Indians) were still trading at York Factory.

In this period the Assiniboine and Cree, through the use of force, took control of the trade at York Factory. These tribes were from the southern and southwest areas. Although Knight, Governor of York Factory, made attempts to make peace between the Assiniboine, Cree and the tribes from the south-southwest area, in the hope of increasing trade at York Factory, his efforts failed. After the 1720's very few trading parties from the distant tribes came to the post.

In 1772 the Hudson's Bay Company encouraged the inland tribes (Architenure Indians) to bypass the Assiniboine and Cree middlemen and come down to York Factory to trade. The tribe refused. Their reason was that they would starve, not being familiar with the handling of canoes and the distance involved. It was these hardships mentioned that caused the inland tribes to play into the hands of the middlemen. During most of the eighteenth century the only band of Indians coming to York Factory were either the Assiniboine or Cree. A small percentage (12%) were of the ojibwa tribes. This means that the Cree and Assiniboine middlemen controlled eighty-eight percent of the trade going into York Factory.[1]

"In order for the vast York Factory trading system to operate smoothly, a set of complex relationships had to be worked out between the participating groups."

This means that the Hudson's Bay Company had to develop a device system that would allow the economy of the Indians to tie in with the market oriented enterprise of the Company. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Assiniboine and Cree middlemen held the upper hand in the fur trade at York Factory. This gave them, to some extent, control of trade terms in that period.[2]

At Fort Paskoyac, many Crees gave their furs, which the French refused to trade, to the Assiniboine middlemen to take to York Factory to trade on their behalf. This was done only among friends and family members. The other Indians who were unable to do this had to trade with the Indian middlemen for used European goods. These tribes often got poor deals, because most of the goods were used two or three years prior to trading.[3]

PROFITS

> "The uneven intensities of European trade rivalries meant that in some quarters the Indians had to pay relatively more for trade goods than they did in other areas. For instance, the Hudson's Bay Company did not move into the Red, Assiniboine and Qu'Appelle valleys in force until the 1790's, and consequently, the Indians living in these territories secured most of their goods from the Northwest Company or from the Indian middlemen."

Because the Northwest Company had to bear the transportation costs of these goods, the middlemen had their goods marked up higher than both of the companies. It was reported that in 1769, the middlemen were trading guns with the Indians for fifty percent more than the Northwest Company and one hundred percent more than the Hudson's Bay Company.[4]

The Assiniboine and Cree middlemen marked up their barter rates even higher. One of the reasons for this mark-up was the Hudson's Bay Company used a double standard system, which means that the middlemen were paying double for the goods they acquired. This made the middlemen increase their barter rates to make up for the difference.[5]

Indian packers - 1926

INDIANS AS TRAPPERS

The contributions of the Indians as trappers to the development of Canada's economy during the 1600-1800 fur trade period was in large through labour. The following information will indicate what it was like to be a trapper in this period.

The Assiniboine occupied a vast territory, along the Carrot River and southward as far as the Touchwood Hills. In addition to occupying this vast territory, they were frequent visitors to York Factory. It was reported in 1684 that over four hundred of these Indians came to trade at the Fort.

Prior to the establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670, it was reported by the French Trading Network, that the Assiniboine and Crees were the most important suppliers of furs.

Of all the Indians who came to trade at York Factory, it was said that the Mountain Indians had to travel the greatest distance. It took them thirty-nine days to make the trip downstream and three months return to do their trading at the Fort.

In 1760-1770, the Hudson's Bay Company reported that Indian tribes in the area of the bay were important sources of furs and the European traders valued their contacts with them.[6]

CONCLUSION

This in itself shows that the Indians were great trappers and the highest producers of fur to the trade. With the information provided it is safe to say that the Indians played an important role as trappers and middlemen.

Modern Chipewyan fur trappers

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(Churchill River)
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